



RETAINWORKS 2026 ECHO:

A Health Navigation Model for
Supporting Employment

Thursdays, March 5 - April 30 | Noon - 1 PM CST

**RETAIN
WORKS** | Retaining
Employment
and Talent After
Injury/Illness
Network





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Employment Support Through the Behavioral Health Lens

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discuss the connection between mental health, physical disability, unemployment and well-being
- Identify the impact of the above factors on self-worth
- Explain building resilience and reducing stress in the face of mental health or physical disability

Unemployment, Physical Disability, and Mental Health

- Those with severe mental illness are disproportionately unemployed
 - Studies consistently link unemployment with psychological distress, particularly depression
- There are very high rates of unemployment among the physically disabled as well
- Many studies demonstrate a connection between physical disability (activity limitations) and mental health, particularly depression
 - The more severe the disability the greater the risk
- The relationship between employment and recovery is strong
- Many studies show participation in supported employment programs is the best means for those with mental health disabilities to obtain and maintain work
- The individual's self-perception is a mitigating factor for the above success – specifically personal variation in independence or self-determination may impact work outcome/success

So, can we assume that the elevated levels of depression observed among persons with disabilities could be attributed to differences in unemployment?



Potentially

- Those with psychical disability are at increased risk for depression associated with...
 - Physical disability implies a condition characterized by diminished capacity to perform social and occupational roles making it more difficult to meet personal needs
- As mentioned previously, there is a well-established link between unemployment and depression and between physical disability and depression
- Newest finding = physical disability is associated with increased vulnerability to the effects of unemployment
- The greater mental health effects of unemployment for those with physical disabilities suggests either
 - Self-worth is more closely tied to employment in this population
 - Financial strain implications of unemployment are more intense
 - Or both

In the end, among those with physical disabilities, unemployment strongly affected financial strain but was unassociated with self-esteem. Furthermore, financial strain was a strong mediating factor between unemployment and depression in this group.



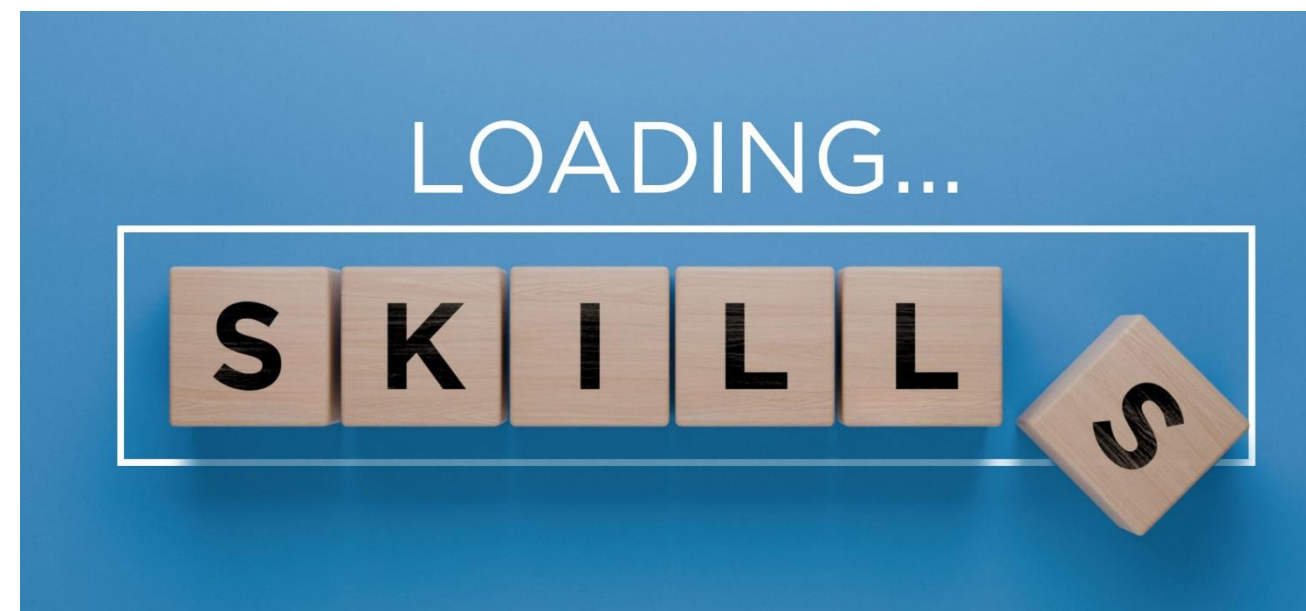
What Does That Mean?

- For persons with physical disabilities, their self-esteem is not further challenged or stigmatized by unemployment, like it is for those without physical disabilities
- Rather the concrete material consequences of unemployment (financial strain) are impactful
- So, a dual approach related to depression/mental health treatment and supported employment is important



Psychological Intervention for Unemployed People

- Historical focus on problem solving: “look harder, more often, use more ways”
 - Problematic, because employment commitment when unemployed produces increased distress and a push to do more increased employment commitment = increased distress
- These results would suggest a focus on skill building rather than looking harder in more places
 - Could include: teaching practical job search techniques, preparation for setbacks, seeking educational achievement, building confidence in ability to work
- For some, employment remains a feature of self esteem



Self-Worth / Disability

- Regardless of disability, research suggests unemployment impacts self-esteem among women
- However, women in particular show a strong desire to appear bodily functional despite physical disability
- Physical activity is important to mental health
 - Individuals with disabilities motivation to find ways to be active is mediated by personal meaning. It is the impetus for the initial motivation for goal-directed action towards physical activity
- Working bodies could be considered functional bodies as this research defines the aesthetic body image concept -- essentially how a person thinks and feels about their appearance while they are engaged in body functioning.
- Therefore, being able to work (because this is perceived as a functional body) may have an impact on self-esteem, particularly for women.

Build Resilience (The Focus on What You **CAN** Do)

Resilience – defined as a human showing a pattern of adaptation or recovery in the context of destabilization

- significantly impacted by a person's ability to self regulate and is something that can be trained; it is not only an innate trait

Critical Components of Success (of the helper)

- Elements of leadership; proactive vs. reactive
- Communication and collaboration; open between helpers and those helping
- Innovation and creative solutions; not prescriptive – meet each unique individual
- Trauma informed responses; consider each persons lived experience and history of trauma
- Address deficits in positive emotion regulation skills – common in those with anxiety/depression and in those with difficult life circumstances
 - Primary intervention is to work on broadening the persons world and experience (seek positive emotion)

Community Resilience

Communities can also foster resilience – however we define communities

Elements of leadership; proactive vs. reactive

- Engagement of the whole community
- Times of stress exacerbate already existent issues
- Simple is better
- Work to understand change, particularly turbulent change breeds resilience and growth
- Focus on trajectory rather than outcome alone



Stress

- Use physical activity, to whatever degree they can
 - Tap into sources of meaning
 - What are the personally meaningful aspects of their life?
 - List my favorite things
 - Foster relationships
 - What is needed for independent living
 - Process of goal setting (brainstorming exercises)
 - Increase hopefulness
 - Not just passive optimism, but fostering of positive attitudes and emotions
 - Agency (decision making) is important
 - Provide decisional autonomy (sense of freedom to make their own decisions) to the degree possible
 - Accounts for above, and is important especially for those with long term disability
 - Increasing decisional autonomy may improve well-being in those with long term physical disability



What Can We Truly Do?

Physiological/systemic stress vs. psychological stress

- Physiological stress = disability or homelessness
- Psychological stress = the individual's perception related to their ability to cope
- Resilience training
 - Increase cognitive flexibility – consider alternative solutions
 - Foster a realistic AND optimistic mindset (assess and change cognitive appraisal, the meaning we assign to things)
 - Incorporate problem solving skills (evaluate, decide, assess, prompt, praise/pros vs. cons)
 - Self-regulation and coping strategies
 - Build relationships (protective factor; social skills groups if needed)
 - Self-esteem and self-efficacy – believe in one's abilities & credit personal strengths

Thank you!